



LSP Myth Buster #14

An ongoing Land Stewardship Project series on ag myths & ways of deflating them.

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Myth: *Meat that's labeled "all natural" is produced in a significantly different manner than meat produced in a "conventional" system.*

Fact:

The word "natural" may well be the most misused (and misunderstood) term in U.S. food labeling. Major companies like

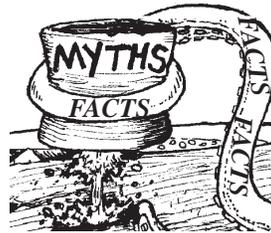
Tyson and Smithfield are quite fond of using the term. In the Midwest, Gold'n Plump chicken, which has its birds raised in confinement systems on contract farms in Minnesota and Wisconsin, has been using clever advertisements, billboards and its website to promote its product as "natural" and containing "no added hormones."

Such claims are perfectly legal, but more than a little confusing to the average consumer. According to the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, "natural" can be used on a label as long as a product does not "contain any artificial flavor or flavoring, coloring ingredient, chemical preservative or any other artificial or synthetic ingredient; and the product and its ingredients are not more than minimally processed (ground, for example)."

Under these guidelines, Smithfield can legally claim its pork chops are "all natural," but that tells consumers nothing about the company's use of antibiotics, or its reputation as one of the largest agricultural polluters in the country, for that matter. Tyson's all natural "Fresh Family Roaster" may contain no artificial flavor, but such labeling language provides no background on the poultry giant's run-ins with the U.S. Justice Department.

"No added hormones" is also a misleading term to use on meat labels. In fact, it has not been legal to use hormones in U.S. pork and poultry production for several years. A "no added hormones" claim for pork and chicken is legal as long as it's followed by a statement that federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones, but sometimes that disclaimer is in a squint-inducing type. Saying a chicken breast contains "no added hormones" is a little like marketing cotton as being produced "without the use of slave labor."

So what's a busy consumer to do? The ideal situation is to buy food products such as meat straight from local farmers who can answer direct questions about their production practices. That's not always possible, of course. Looking for products that are certified by a third-party agency is the next best thing. Food Alliance Midwest and Certified Organic are well-established certification systems that utilize stringent standards to make sure consumers are getting what they think they are getting.



More Information

◆ Check out the Food Alliance Midwest's criteria for livestock production at www.foodalliance.org/midwest/index.html.

◆ The Land Stewardship Project's Stewardship Food Network lists farmers who direct-market meat and other products to consumers. The latest list is in the Jan./Feb./March 2006 *Land Stewardship Letter*. Free copies are available in the Land Stewardship Project's various offices, or by visiting www.landstewardshipproject.org/foodfarm-mail.html.

◆ The Consumers Union has developed a user-friendly website (www.eco-labels.org) that allows consumers to check on the credibility of 137 "green" product labels, including the Food Alliance. The website allows people to learn more about products that are eco-labeled compared to those that are conventionally farmed or produced. Consumers can also compare labels quickly with a shorthand report card that can be printed out and used while shopping.

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This Myth Buster is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 651-653-0618 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.